Katalog GSRBI 'Proyek 1' Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi_lo p.14-18 (p.18-23 in pdf)

Every Day Art (Practices) against Elitism

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Artworks are sophisticated “goods”. Sophisticated art is the subject most discussed in art forums, from cultural seminars to education programs. Outside this phenomena, other arts are often considered "half art" or even "not art" at all.

In spite of this, generally every phenomenon in art is of equal worth. Distinctions in frames of reference which have caused differences of aesthetics, expressive values and functions of art should not become a basis on which to create levels in art; first-class art and goat-class art.

However, although art forums and art education systems tend to distinguish sharply between one art phenomenon and another – thus creating a dilemma between art “that is art” and art “that is not” - the definition of art in our language can accommodate various type of art.

The word art (*seni*) according to General Dictionary of Bahasa Indonesia (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*), compiled by Poerwadarminta (1976 version published by the Centre for Language Education and Development) has two descriptions: ***(1) the ability to make or create something elegant or beautiful,*** and ***(2) a work made with exceptional skill, such as poetry, paintings, carvings and so forth.***

This definition of beautiful can be found in the local language in which the definition is rooted. In Javanese, art is generally related to its function in common usage. The Dictionary of High Javanese, *Bausastra Jawa*, of which Poerwadarminta is a co-compiler, described art as ***kagunan,*** which means: **(1) intelligence *(kapinteran).* (2) or a constructive endeavour (*jejasan ingkang adipeni).* (3) or an outpouring of senses which produce beauty - images, songs, carvings *(wudar ing pambudi nganakke kaendahan – gegambaran, kidung, ngukir-ukir)***. The impression of beauty comes from its root word which is “useful in the sense of : **characters, skills, creation whom one may take advantage of.**

Within the framework above – and also ***panggorga*** in Batak language and ***undagi*** in Balinese culture – it is evident that our definitions of art (*seni)* rely on an aesthetics which endeavours to identify a particular sense in the production of creations which are categorised as having towards beauty. That sense is a common ability that is no more special than other abilities. Thus the products of such endeavours, despite their expressiveness (of a reflective character) are parallel to daily products that are useful and functional.

Bahasa Indonesia is a recent language, therefore we must reconsider the term *fine arts*. The rendering of the word *fine* in Malay is “refined or pure”. The understanding of fine arts in this definition is then burdened with the term of pure art describing the creation of beautiful objects such as paintings, sculptures, carvings and architecture. Consequently, paintings, sculptures and architecture cannot be considered as other than derivatives from the term “*fine arts*”.

So if there is pure art, there must be “art which is not pure”. And this is the basis of the image which distinguishes between art phenomena; there is a level above and a level below. The terms *fine arts, beaux arts*, or often *gentle arts, liberal arts* and polite arts have differentiated art phenomenons.

The roots of these terms are from the arts in ancient Greek culture, that is *mousike techne*, none other than “an artistic sensibility” based on the practice of specific skill (musing, or contemplating, perhaps), as differentiated from work which is regarded as course labor, that is, *techne*.

In the 16th Century during the Renaissance, art was transformed into a set of circumstances known as *artes liberales* – works of free people. The sensibility of art in this definition were no longer just skill in contemplation, but also identified through labor and its realisation. Thus work entailing artistic sensibility becomes specialised. Not all work can accommodate such sensibility.

These circumstances were clearly described with the concept of art known as *La Belle arti del disegno*. In this concept, types of labor and endeavour that could encompass this very specific sensibility included: painting, sculpture and architecture. Works outside these fields were considered unable to accommodate such sensibility.

Although within these developments towards modern art – which was adapted world-wide, including by us – there occurred shifts in the limitations and definitions (for example, the inclusion of printmaking and the

exclusion of architecture), the basic concept which differentiated art phenomena was maintained. This is the reason why the differentiation between art phenomena is most keenly felt in the field of visual art.

It cannot be denied, our modern art practices mostly refer to *mousike techne* – art regarded as a speciality because it offers sophisticated values and ways of thinking. Definitions of visual art, (*Seni Rupa*) are closely linked to *artes liberales* – notice the similarity to pure arts.

"Seni Rupa" in Bahasa Indonesia first appeared in Indonesian newspapers printed during the Japanese regime, covering news and reviews of painting exhibitions. *Kamus Modern Bahasa Indonesia* (Modern Dictionary of Bahasa Indonesia) compiled by Mohammad Zain in the 50s wrote definitions of "Seni Rupa" which consisted of: painting, sculpture and drawing. While *Kamus Umum Bahasa Indonesia* (General Dictionary of Bahasa Indonesia) wrote the definition as: sculpture and painting.

Rather than creating broader limits for art practice, these definitions of visual art indicate that art is formalised as an adaptation of a new manifestation. The late writer and painter Trisno Soemardjo expressed, "We have no tradition in painting." Enthusiasm for this new tradition was of course followed by enthusiasm for distinguishing art phenomenon. Famous Indonesian painter Rusli, also a member of Jakarta Academy (*Akademi Jakarta)* expressed his opinion that batik painting was derived from traditional art which differed from painting – in other words, not art.

The late art critic Dan Suwaryono approved the adaptation by stating that modern art is based on intellectual studies. Should we then seek for new references considering art phenomenon from our own surroundings? Dan Suwaryono replied that modern (visual) art resulted from centuries of thinking, could we correct that by a definition coming from an idea we only just arrived at?

Dan Suwaryono was correct. The acknowledgement of *artes liberales* as the only (fine) art practice was due to a long tradition formed over two centuries. Around this type of art has formed a great circle – both overseas and in our own environment, including networks of artists, art critic, art collectors, museum, academics, study groups, gallery syndicates as well as official institutions.

Yet there are others who dare to express opinions otherwise. In the 70s, a leading art expert, Dr. Soedjoko, launched a controversial stance: speaking against "elitist art" rooted in those Greek and Renaissance understandings.

In various writings, lecture and discussions, Soedjoko stated that visual arts development and recognition in both the higher education system and centres for art was based in the "*romantic agony*" of the individualistic Renaissance. Soedjoko strongly criticized such aesthetic and proposed an alternative which he defined as – close to the definition of art in Bahasa Indonesia – (visual) art being enjoyable and purposeful for many people. For Soedjoko there is only one type of visual art, which is craft.

Soedjoko was not the only one with such belief. Views favouring traditional arts of a more "gentle" approach were frequently professed. Many of us were ambivalent in perceiving the rich phenomenon of art expression in Indonesia. It was as if we vacillated between two definitions of (visual) art and two aesthetics. We like modern art, we're also fond of traditional art.

Prestigious traditional art is capable of contesting modern art, given the opportunity. Such traditional arts are said to contain the roots of Indonesian identity. Turning to traditional cultural values is common in a culture injured by colonialism.

Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru which began in 1975 – and dissolved in 1980 – is also against elitist art and attempts to redefine visual art. Its Manifesto (published in 1979) asserted the purpose of this movement to dismantle the definition of visual art that was confined to painting, sculpture and printmaking. Its belief was: aesthetics in visual art derived from a plurality of phenomena.

The movement was convinced that modern art need not survive on the definition of *artes liberales.* This was a reaction to the confusion of artists in the field of modern art who were still busily trying to adapt their forms and groping for criteria. It seems as if the event of adaptation will never reach its end.

This was a clumsy grasping for standards – due to a lack of understanding it resulted in an overly suspicious response to experimentation and exploration of visual art from art critics and the art education system. The

result of this was stagnation. Motif and styles of expression kept circulating because any new motif was attacked.

Among young artists this stagnation was coloured by other factors. In reality visual artworks are a commodity with standard motif. Creating artworks outside that motif risks no sale. In contrast, Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru creates works with new idioms, taking this risk.

Anti-elitism in Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru was also apparent in its tendency to take social issues into account. This was not new, since Indonesian modern art is rich with similar endeavours - paintings by Sudjojono and Affandi for example - although there are essential differences.

Social issues in Indonesian modern art are associated with individualistic approaches. These were entrenched in the perception of art. Because of this issue, society represented in artwork became merely *subject matter.* Therefore, their value appeared equal to objects such as a woman's figure, flowers or natural landscape. In other words, issues of society should be "sexy", able to create inspiration and the desire to express it..

This resulted in an end product which is appears as a limited language of beauty and arrogance. The representation of social issues in visual artworks was often distorted due to its creator's views or filtered through his aesthetics principles. However strong an expression – for example artworks carrying a mission of social protest – it remains "number two" inside a picture frame.

Gerak Seni Rupa Baru was searching for other approaches: raising an issue without altering its substance. It was an effort ot unify it in one expression, to really bring together inspiration and rhythm to the problem at hand. Dramatisation and representation of social problems was not done through an individual artistic interpretation, but rather by approching the real issue. Research methods and other studies may be included if necessary.

Project I (Project One) titled "Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi" published in 1987 signifies recent exploration of – the revived – Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru; a manifestation of exploration, oppposition to elitism and revitalizing pluralism in visual art through practices of art in every day life. The project focuses on: situational works, mass culture and design.

It's almost impossible to summarize the art of every day life in an exhibition. Therefore what appeared in Project I specifically categorised as artistic expressions which contained "urban visual symbols" of metropolitan society. The latter may be found in the *pasar raya* (Indonesian version of a department store which references street vendor's style) that may be interpreted as some kind of *dunia fantasi* (fantasy world) - an offering of the fantasies and dreams that are in such high demand these days.

The project exhibits a dramatized and interpreted version of the Pasar Raya atmosphere as a situational work with space as its basic element. This offering of dreams and urban symbols are "marketed" with an emphasis on clarity, unhidden and presented as they usually are.

Project I consisted of only one work in 4 dimensions. In other words, a time (T) element was incorporated. The 3 dimensional composition could be perceived completely only when one completed the T factor. This T factor was also the main constituent of the work's sequential presentation when viewers entered the work.

All the spatial elements of the work are unified by the base element of soft construction (figures of store employees and equipment made of kapok) presented in a similar pose (as if pulled by gravity), creating a dominant rhythm. The main material of Project I was visual art products that were richly symbolic and familiar in the daily life of society. A few of these products – just a small sample of what was actually there - includes: advertisement found in mass-media, giant billboards, pin-up calendars, magazine covers, t-shirts, fashion and accessories, stickers from road side stalls, comic books, film posters, toys, album covers, and popular company logos.

Most of the visual art products presented were mass produced and represented part of the mercantile world, designed for calculation of consumers and profit. Such principles differ indeed from the ideals of elitist art.

Katalog GSRBI 'Proyek 1' Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi_lo p.14-18 (p.18-23 in pdf)

The ideals of mass production – which focuses on profit and doesn't seek value – have been mocked by scholars. Critics then ridiculed it as "Mass Culture". Such criticism spread around the world in the 50's, and in its transformation it became even harsher. Mass culture then became a threat to "High Culture" and society.

In this criticism consumers of mass culture are merely atoms standing alone. They are ignorant and act only on the impulses of their base instincts. They are passive and without defence.

Obviously this is a critic grounded in elitism. A belief in the autonomous individual, derived from a High Culture that developed over two centuries, is the basis for such criticism. It is these principles which elevate creativity, and reject the norms of the group in creating art. And it is these principles which endorse High Culture as the only culture which is legitimate in its fusion with works of "high art".

One particular attitude from the principles of High Culture was to regard the majority of ordinary people as having poor appreciation of aesthetics. The need to raise appreciation of art is it's constant complaint. This appeal is amongst us and we've grown tired of hearing it uttered in Taman Ismail Marzuki.

Although there are many policies around goods for sale that cannnot be endorsed, being so strategic and cunning, there is no reason to say that the visual art – a sector which is highly produced –associated with it, is "not art." They are traded with a certain intent and apart from that, the aspects of visual art are familiar to most members of our society. Stickers, images on T-shirt, comic books, all of which are sold from street vendors – products of home industries with limited production, whilst very popular and in demand – reflect the influence of that common interest. In this production it is the influence of mass production that delivers rich symbolism. Here, it depicts a lifestyle.

Design is an interesting phenomenon which grows alongside industry and technology. In design, the sensibility of visual art is applied to a variety of practical goods, along with processes oriented to its usability. Because the sensibilty of visual art in design is not directed to expression or values – because it is limited by function – design products are are regarded as "partial" visual art. These were once condescendingly called mechanical arts, before the term applied arts was introduced. The term applied art was later replaced with the term design and has gained popularity ever since.

In Indonesia, design was introduced in art academies. In the 40 years of the development of tertiary education it's scope was expanded as a field of study. Nowadays, one may study *artes liberales* as well as design in art academies.

Design education covers graphic design which is particularly oriented to printed information, interior design dealing with space arrangements and furnitures, industrial design or product design, and textile design that are manufactured in bulk.

However, the expansion of design as a field of study has not encouraged art education system to look beyond the existing delineation which defines the limits of visual art. There are absolutely no efforts in that environment to define a coherent aesthetic which would integrate both types of art practice.

In the daily practice of the environment of visual arts higher education the faculty terms of "art" and "design" majors intensifies the distinctions between both terms. Such confusion was formalized by the Department of Education and Culture by determining the standard of higher education as the Education (Faculty) of Fine Art and Design.

Experts working for art academies are suspicious of design. This means that the largest practice of visual art in today's society is not been accepted. The familiar and every day practices of visual art have been spared from appreciation and critical evaluation. Its power and expressions, its message, its psychological dimension, its ability to touch and move human imaginations are beyond observation. Thus, design has been developed outside our horizon.

In contrast, the visual art aspects found in works of design, especially the creative process, has given birth to new patterns of visual art that are full of potential. Industrial design created to visual art full of potential. Industrial design, which deals with machineries and large-scale production carefully calculates both the aesthetic and psychological dimensions. For a society living in advanced industrial system these calculations are gathered through a variety of sciences, and are accorded much respect. Usually they exist in the

“research and development” sector.

Graphic design is also closely related to industry and trading. In this sector it is obvious how influential visual art is. The products not only posess charm but also the power to move – something all artists aspire to – because of the methods of social researches and psychological theory. During the first half of the 20th century graphic design had not played a role in advertising. The principle of offering products for trade assumed that consumers are rational beings. They must be convinced through their common sense to buy. Therefore in advertising, persuasion is the key principle while images are merely used to attract.

However around the middle of the 20th century major changes occurred following the emergence of Motivational Research, which emerged from various theories found in sociology, social anthropology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, social psychology, semantic studies and communication science. Research to understand the depths of the human spirit was done through group discussions, undirected meetings and projection techniques.

These methods concluded that consumers are not completely rational. What needs to be awakened to create the motivation to buy is the subconscious. Based on this the theory, images play a very important role not because they influence rational understanding, but instead because they evoke association and emotion.

We do not know precisely why advertising and graphic design which produces packaging is sophisticated enough to influence people, however, it is clear that there has been certain “boom of manufactured goods” in the past two decades. Behind the scenes, industry and international trading companies are completed by promotional vehicles and advertising policies.

We can already feel it’s influence, and that means that our images are already influenced by visual objects, and that means that our images are already influenced by “visual culture.” The image which most often arises when we are faced with words, sentences, sound and expression is a pictorial image.

Design is a rational visual art, because of its potential go beyond the the values of its mission and all that brings. Its basic principles and working processes are actually very different from elitist art. By comparing the following pairs of concepts, both can be seen to contradict the other. The paired concepts are (left: elitist art, right: design).

ELITIST	DESIGN
Orientation to the creator	Orientation to the consumer
Subjective	Objective
Intuitive, emotional	Logical
Individual work	Co-operative (team)
Simple work	About the production process
Spontaneous	Planned and systematic
Anti-data	Work based on research

Project I (Project One) Pasar Raya Dunia Fantasi was an expressive work which tried to follow the principles of design. Because of this it was a collective work, made by a team of 16 visual artists from various fields. A number of research projects and studies were undertaken to determine elements for display. The studies include observation of advertisements followed by research into how ads influence the upper-middle class; and a qualitative study on stickers, comic books, covers from women's magazines and similar products.

Emotional and intuitive ways of working – let alone a state of trance, were considered taboo Sensibilities of visual art and the impression of the theme were guided by the results of the above collaborative studies.

If we want to liberate the horizon of visual art in Indonesia in its socio-cultural sense, we must dare ourselves to rid of at least three main obstacles to our sociological awareness.

1. Singular viewpoints which see merely one concept, which gives birth to only one visual art, one global

society ruling a completely coherent form of expression. This view ignores the realities of our society, such as cultural practices of various ethnicities, villages, urban areas as well as variety of classes and social layers.

2. Views illustrating Indonesian art history as a linear process. This view envisions prehistoric art as a line ending at a certain point which then connects to Hindu art and later Islamic art.

In this linear history we encounter ancient art as traditional ending at a certain point where modern visual art begins. Therefore outside modern art – which is regarded as a “representative” of now – all other form of expressions belong the past and are not art.

Nonetheless everyone knows there are various traditional practices of visual art in Indonesia. Not all of it is extinct. Some have adapted themselves due to shifts in socio-cultural practices and continue to survive, others have even developed.

3. Views that merely prioritize visual art based on the term *artes liberales*. Importantly, this view limits the ability of the term visual art to expand, to become an image of visual art which forms the main part of material culture, locating visuality as an important art.